



FALL / WINTER 2004

Veterans' Health[®]

VA Capitol
Health Care
Network
VISN 5
FIVE STAR SERVICE FOR THOSE WHO SERVED

**A life lesson
to follow** *page 2*

**Seasonal
safety tips** *page 6*

Network Highlights

- VA Maryland Health
Care System *page 3*
- Martinsburg
VAMC *page 8*
- Washington DC
VAMC *page 10*



A life lesson to follow



James J. Nocks,
M.D., M.S.H.A.

For many years Ben Stein has written a biweekly column for the online website called “Monday Night at Morton’s,” named after the famous restaurant frequented by Hollywood stars. Now, he is moving on to pursue other interests. Stein’s final column praises the most unselfish among us—our military personnel who protect us daily—and portrays a valuable lesson learned in his life. Stein wrote:

A real star is the soldier of the 4th Infantry Division who poked his head into a hole on a farm near Tikrit, Iraq. He could have been met by a bomb or a hail of AK-47 bullets. A real star, the kind who haunts my memory night and day, is the U.S. soldier in Baghdad who saw a little girl playing with a piece of unexploded ordnance on a street near where he was guarding a station. He pushed her aside and threw himself on it just as it exploded. He left a family desolate in California and a little girl alive in Baghdad.

There are plenty of other stars in the American firmament ... the orderlies and paramedics who bring in people who have been in terrible accidents and prepare them for surgery, the teachers and nurses who throw their whole spirits into caring for autistic children, the kind men and women who work in hospices and in cancer wards. Think of each and every fireman who was running up the stairs at the World Trade Center as the towers began to collapse.

I came to realize that life lived to help others is the only one that matters. This is my highest and best use as a human.

After reading Stein’s column, I was moved to reminisce how many VA employees over the years have had the wonderful opportunity to work with these heroes and care for their wounds of war. VA offers another way for others to help our veterans—volunteering. Our volunteer program coordinates the work of hundreds of volunteers for service organizations, and individual groups donate many hours helping veterans at our medical centers and clinics. Volunteers help our veterans receive the timely care they so deserve, and for that, I am grateful. If you wish to become a volunteer, contact the following personnel at these medical centers.

The Washington DC VA Medical Center

Paula Gorman, (202) 745-8320

The VA Maryland Health Care System

Sabrina Clark, (410) 605-7100

The Martinsburg VA Medical Center

Dotty Hough, (304) 263-0811, ext. 3309

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James J. Nocks, M.D." with a stylized flourish at the end.

James J. Nocks, M.D., M.S.H.A., Network Director
VA Capital Health Care Network, VISN 5



Giving back to our returning troops

Our newest veterans from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom are receiving a special welcome home thanks to a new program developed by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that helps service members quickly learn about benefits and services and get fast attention for their health care needs.

One reason the program has been successful is that VA staff members recognize their roles in guiding these returning service members. “We’re making great progress to ensure our nation’s newest veterans have smooth and

seamless transitions from the DoD into the VA system for benefits and health care,” said Dennis H. Smith, Director of the VA Maryland Health Care System.

Service members who have lost limbs or are experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after combat in Iraq and Afghanistan are among those eligible for services.

Wait no longer

The program has helped more than 300 men and women gain easy access to medical care. In the past, veterans endured a lengthy process, often waiting several months before they could begin receiving VA health care and benefits. These newest veterans, however, only have to wait about one week.

“When a service member is about to be

discharged from the Walter Reed Army Medical Center or another DoD facility, a caseworker from the facility contacts me,” said Christopher Buser, M.S.W., Transition Coordinator of the VA Maryland Health Care System. “We quickly transfer the service member’s medical records, process all paperwork and alert the admissions and medical staff that the service member is coming.”

Special support

Among the returning service members receiving care in Maryland are those learning to adjust to new artificial limbs. Several patients have benefited from a program that trains disabled veterans to drive specially adapted vehicles. Others have been screened for treatment in the VA Maryland Health Care System’s PTSD program, which includes substance abuse treatment.

Sonja Batten, Ph.D., Coordinator of the Trauma Recovery Program, is a clinical psychologist and an expert in PTSD. “It took us years to recognize PTSD in soldiers returning from Vietnam,” she said. “Today, we treat men and women right away so they can make quick adjustments back home and within their communities.” She noted, in particular, the many soldiers who return with emotional disorders after spending several months guarding the dangerous streets of Iraq or Afghanistan.

For more information about this important new initiative that helps injured service members returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, please contact Chris Buser at (410) 605-7259. 📞

Learn more

For more information about health benefits and services available to our newest vets, visit www.vba.va.gov/EFIF.



At the center of MS care



The VA Maryland Health Care System officially dedicated its Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Center for Excellence this summer at the Baltimore VA Medical Center. Congressman Benjamin Cardin, veterans' service

groups, staff and other political representatives and community leaders attended.

The Center's mission is to offer improved services to the approximately 25,000 U.S. veterans living with MS today, as well

as to their families and health care providers. The Center:

- provides clinical care for veterans
- conducts research
- develops resources for the team of physicians, nurses, occupational and physical therapists, social workers, psychologists and others involved in patient care

One new service the Center provides is an online resource at www.va.gov/ms, which offers the chance for patients and their families to ask questions and learn more about MS. Another improvement—a toll-free phone service available 24 hours a day, seven days a week—lets veterans' health care providers consult with a physician specially trained in caring for patients with MS. The service helps patients who live far from VA medical centers by putting information in their health care providers' hands.

Christopher T. Bever, M.D., MS Center Director, said, "The new Center allows us to coordinate the best clinical care, research, education, communications, bioinformatics and telemedicine within the VA health care system."

The Baltimore-based Center serves patients and health care providers in the eastern United States. MS Centers of Excellence are also in VA medical centers in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington.

For more information about the MS Centers of Excellence, visit www.va.gov/ms. ★

A new look for outpatient care

Local community members joined veterans, employees and volunteers to mark the opening of Perry Point's newest patient care facility. The new Partial Hospitalization Program building, completed this summer, provides better mental health and intensive case management services to Maryland outpatients who have long-term adjustment problems in the community. The \$1.5 million

building replaces the old Perry Point Day Treatment Center.

A structured treatment program helps veterans ease back into the community and prevents future hospitalization. An experienced team—including a physician, a social worker, registered nurses and recreational and occupational therapists—teaches veterans to manage daily-living activities and helps family members and friends

better understand their loved ones' illnesses.

The 5,600-square-foot facility features a large multipurpose room, a kitchen, group therapy areas, patient locker rooms and clinical and administrative offices. The building's unique design provides an open-floor plan for free-flowing group activities and separate work areas for individual patient activities and group therapy sessions. A skylight and large decorative windows throughout the building let in plenty of natural light and provide a magnificent view of the Chesapeake Bay and Susquehanna River.

Jane Manlove, L.C.S.W./C., Program Coordinator of the Partial Hospitalization Program, said, "The outpatients who participate in the program take great pride in showing the new building to visitors. We are hopeful this new environment will add to their quality of care and foster a surrounding that promotes healing."

Dennis H. Smith, Director of the VA Maryland Health Care System, added, "The new Partial Hospitalization Program building is another shining example of the VA Maryland Health Care System's continuing commitment to better serve our veterans' needs." ★



Participants in the Partial Hospitalization Program building ribbon-cutting ceremony included (left to right) Orlando Settles, Program Participant; James J. Nocks, M.D., M.S.H.A., Network Director, VA Capitol Health Care Network, VISN 5; Dennis H. Smith, Director, the VA Maryland Health Care System; Stephen Deutsch, M.D., Director, VISN 5 Mental Health Service Line; Christine LaGana, M.D., the VA Maryland Health Care System Mental Health Facility Service Line Manager; and Jane Manlove, L.C.S.W./C., Program Coordinator, Partial Hospitalization Program.



Seasonal safety tips

Taking the right precautions can see you safely through the winter months, whether you're burrowing at home or traveling to colder climates. Ready yourself for the change in weather with these tips.

At home

- Keep smoke and carbon monoxide detectors in working order and know the signs of carbon monoxide poisoning: nausea, dizziness, headache, fatigue and shortness of breath.

- Place doormats at entryways to prevent slippery floors.
- Store a first-aid kit, a radio, a flashlight, batteries and a supply of bottled water and nonsalty canned food or food mixes.
- Ask your utility company about services available to power-dependent customers during blackouts.
- Set your thermostat to at least 65°.
- Have your heating system, chimneys and flues checked every year.

Outdoors

- Tread carefully on slick or icy surfaces. Spread salt, sand or cat litter on walking areas. Wear shoes that provide good traction.
- Avoid walking through running water more than 6 inches deep—its force can cause a fall.
- Stay inside during severe storms or extreme cold. Bitter temperatures increase your risk of frostbite and hypothermia (when body temperature drops too low).
- Consider the wind chill factor, which combines temperature with the cooling effects of the wind. It can feel a lot colder than the actual temperature indicates.
- When you're spending time outdoors, take frequent breaks to warm up inside. Be alert for numb areas on the face, ears, fingers or toes, which can signal frostbite.
- Dress warmly and in layers. Wear a hat and gloves.

In the car

- Drive cautiously and be alert for changing road conditions.
- Avoid areas known to flood suddenly. Don't try driving through flooded areas.
- Keep your gas tank full for emergency use and to keep the fuel line from freezing.
- Keep an emergency kit in the car that includes a working flashlight or flare.
- Consider keeping a cell phone in the car—but don't talk while you're driving.
- Check your antifreeze and wiper fluid.
- Make sure your tires are suitable for local road conditions.
- Avoid traveling alone.
- Dress warmly. Store blankets in the trunk in case of a breakdown. Keep hats, gloves and coats handy in case you have to wait in the car or walk for help. ★

Keeping contagious bugs at bay

If you're like most Americans, expect to get as many as four colds this winter. That's a lot of sneezing, sniffing and coughing. Although a cold may seem like a harmless malady—more of a nuisance than anything—it can lead to more serious infections such as sinusitis, bronchitis, the flu and pneumonia.

As you age, your risk for developing these infections increases if you have a chronic

condition such as diabetes or heart disease, are dealing with psychological stress, have an impaired immune system, are being treated for cancer, live in a nursing home or work in a health care facility. It's important to see your health care provider right away if your cold doesn't get better within seven to 10 days, if your symptoms worsen or if you have a chronic respiratory condition.

Flu and pneumonia

Signs of the flu include runny nose, coughing, sneezing, sore throat, fever of 101° or more, chills, body aches, appetite loss, fatigue and weakness. See your health care provider if you have flu symptoms, especially if you have any risk factors. Taking a prescription antiviral medication within 48 hours of the symptoms' onset may help.

Adults over 65 have an increased risk of pneumonia, a lung infection and inflammation that often stems from a cold or the flu. Symptoms of pneumonia vary and include chills, fever, sweating, chest pain, cough, headache and muscle pain. Prompt treatment can minimize complications, so see your health care provider if you suspect you have more than a cold or the flu. He or she may prescribe antibiotics or antivirals and instruct you to rest until you've recovered.

Stay-away strategies

Sound nutrition and regular exercise can strengthen your immune system to fight infectious diseases, and regular hand washing can ward off germs. Don't share drinking glasses with others, and ask family members suffering from colds to sneeze or cough into tissues and then throw them out. If you smoke, quit, since smoking makes your lungs more vulnerable to respiratory infection. Annual flu shots will give you added protection and are recommended for adults over age 50 or at high risk and for those who may transmit the flu to someone at high risk. ★



Special support for special seniors

The Geriatrics & Long-Term Care Service Line members at The Martinsburg VA Medical Center hosted an open house on August 24 to celebrate the launch of their new Geriatric Outpatient Clinic. The clinic, which officially began serving veterans in early July, offers an outpatient specialty program that cares for veterans ages 75 and older who have special needs.



Elisabeth Sethi, M.D., Geriatrics & Long-Term Care Service Line Manager, helps veterans who have special needs live more active, fulfilling lives.

The clinic provides a comprehensive geriatric assessment and evaluation that goes beyond a traditional medical assessment. An interdisciplinary team comprised of a geriatrician, physician assistant, registered nurse and social worker determines how well veterans perform daily-living activities, interact psychosocially and cope with multiple diagnoses. The team addresses chronic-care needs and geriatric conditions such as dementia, depression, decreased mobility, incontinence



and weight loss. It also assesses safety risks veterans may face caused by cognitive impairment, inadequate caregiver support and reduced independence.

The clinic staff helps veterans improve their quality of life, maintain their highest level of function in their home environments and reduce health care costs by decreasing the need for inpatient care services. Elisabeth Sethi, M.D., Geriatrics & Long-Term Care Service Line Manager, supervises the staff. For more information about the new Geriatric Outpatient Clinic, call Dr. Sethi or Nancy Shoup at (304) 263-0811, ext. 4478. ★

Share your care with JCAHO

At The Martinsburg VA Medical Center, we strive to provide you the best health care possible. To do, however, we need your feedback. You can tell us how you rate your care through an interview with the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO).

JCAHO conducts unannounced accreditation surveys of The Martinsburg VAMC on an ongoing basis. The surveys evaluate how well we comply with nationally established JCAHO standards. JCAHO then determines if we receive accreditation and, if so, under what conditions.

JCAHO standards focus on organization, safety of care and safety of the environment in which care is provided. Here's where you can help. If you have feedback on these areas, request a public information interview with a JCAHO field representative. You must make the request in writing, including the information you wish to discuss, and send it to:

Division of Accreditation Operations,
Office of Quality Monitoring,
Joint Commission on
Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations,
One Renaissance Boulevard,
Oakbrook Terrace, IL 60181

You can also fax the information to **(630) 792-5636** or e-mail it to **complaint@jcaho.org**.

JCAHO's Office of Quality Monitoring will acknowledge your request in writing or by telephone 10 days before the survey begins. If your request is granted, an account representative will contact you to let you know the interview's time and location as well as who will speak with you. The information you share will be carefully evaluated for relevance to the accreditation process. ★

An easier check for colorectal cancer

When it comes to fighting cancer, knowledge is power. Take colorectal cancer, the second-leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States. The American Cancer Society estimates colorectal cancer will claim 56,730 lives by the end of 2004. Yet colorectal cancer is one of the most preventable cancers—when caught in its earliest stages.

It's critical you identify colorectal cancer *before* any symptoms appear. You're at higher risk for the disease if you're over age 50 or have a family history of colo-rectal cancer or colon polyps.

Your primary care provider can teach you a simple way to check for colorectal cancer when

it's still treatable—a *fecal occult blood test (FOBT)*. You may be familiar with this test that checks if blood is present in the stool. Your primary care provider will show you how to take samples of your stool and give you a kit to take home.

A traditional FOBT kit provides a stick, which you use to smear stool samples onto a small piece of paper. If you find this test unappealing, take heart: The Martinsburg VA Medical Center now offers a simpler, more comfortable collection method. With this new test, you wipe a test pad onto the identified target area. You then pull off a biodegradable, flushable tissue liner and fold over the test pad to create a sealed, odor-free specimen. After repeating the process for three consecutive days, you mail the samples to your medical center. You must complete the test within a week after your visit and include the collection date on the envelope you mail.

An FOBT can stop colorectal cancer before it starts. Don't miss this chance to add more years to your life. For more information, contact your primary care provider. ★

Preparing for your test

Before starting your fecal occult blood test, you need to follow some guidelines. Avoid the following for three days before you start collecting your stool samples:

- red meat, including beef, lamb and liver
- processed meat, such as hot dogs
- raw fruits and vegetables, including melons, radishes, turnips, broccoli and cauliflower
- rectal suppositories

Do enjoy these healthy foods at least two days before you collect your first sample: well-cooked pork, poultry and fish; all cooked fruits and vegetables; and high-fiber foods such as whole-wheat bread, bran cereal and popcorn.





At the forefront of technology



Look no further for a medical facility that's up to speed on your health care needs. The Washington DC VA Medical Center has been selected from among 1,298 medical facilities nationwide as "Most Wired." The competitive selection process—sponsored by *Hospital & Health Networks*, a publication of the American Hospital Association—reviewed U.S. hospitals' Internet services, focusing on quality, customer service, business processes, workforce issues and public health and safety.

Hospital & Health Networks looked for facilities that provide online access to current patient medical records, patient medical histories, patient demographics and clinician notes. The DCVAMC took the lead in all categories.

Ever-advancing care

Of the 6,000 U.S. hospitals, fewer than 20 percent use advanced technologies such as

Our talented Information and Resource Management team ensures we remain a top provider of leading-edge health care services. Seated left to right: Nina Faulk-Knight, Irene Thomas, Catherine Sacker, Amanda Graves, Fenicia Johnson, Cassandra Heiges and Louis Grissom. Standing left to right: Anthony Perez, Henry Palmer, William Ouzts, Robert Williamson, Mark Simonson, Chiao Wu, Steve Vance, Luke Bowie, Scott Walker, Derek Davis, Joseph Wilkins (hiding), Gregory Issac, Keith Holman, Thomas Henderson and Jeff Hallmark.

electronic health records. The DCVAMC has had its Computerized Patient Record System in place since the early '80s and continually strives to improve it. The system helps coordinate care and offer timely services by providing doctors and nurses with complete, accurate information when they need it. During emergencies, physicians can access medical records from remote locations.

We're also ahead of the pack in bar-code medication administration, a system that uses a scanning device to identify medications and patients, ensuring the right drugs get into the right hands. Electronic prescriptions and signatures, another safety check, ensure medication errors don't occur from illegible handwriting.

A link to the future

The DCVAMC plays an important role in shaping new technology, too. It served as a test site for My Health@Vet, an interactive web-based system that helps veterans regularly monitor their health and encourages better communication between patients and health care providers. Since its launch, the program has expanded nationwide. Register for My Health@Vet at **www.myhealthvet.com**.

We're extremely proud of our Information and Resource Management team members, who keep this complex system humming and support continuing systems education for staff. They deserve our thanks and appreciation for helping the DCVAMC remain a pioneer in technological development. ★

More high marks from JCAHO



The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations (JCAHO) proved our ongoing mission to bring better care to veterans, awarding The Washington DC VA Medical Center with continued accreditation and no findings on July 15.

Each year since 1993, JCAHO has conducted one-day, random, unannounced surveys at 5 percent of accredited organizations. The surveys serve as an important way to ensure that organizations continue to comply with JCAHO standards throughout the three-year accreditation cycle.

JCAHO evaluates and accredits its nearly 16,000 health care organizations and programs in the United States. An independent, not-for-profit organization, it's

the nation's predominant standard-setting and accrediting body. Since 1951, JCAHO has maintained state-of-the-art standards that focus on improving the quality and safety of care provided by health care organizations.

During our survey, JCAHO reviewed previous recommendations for improvement and demographic data related to various clinical services. It also focused on three priority areas: staffing, infection control and medication management.

Sanford M. Garfunkel, Medical Center Director, called the survey results, "proof of an organization-wide commitment to provide quality care on an ongoing basis." ★

A tribute to Korean vets

The honorable An Joo Seub, South Korean Minister of Patriots and Veterans Affairs, paid a visit to The Washington DC VA Medical Center on July 26 to learn about VA's health care delivery system and meet veterans who fought in the Korean conflict.

Sanford M. Garfunkel, Medical Center Director, welcomed Minister An—along with several high-level Korean officials—with an orientation to the VA system and an extensive tour of the



An Joo Seub, South Korean Minister of Patriots and Veterans Affairs, thanks the DCVAMC veterans who served honorably in the Korean conflict.

medical center. Korean War veterans then greeted the guests with Korean folk songs they learned during service.

Minister An, touched by the response, expressed his gratitude and that of his country to the

WRIISC Director earns honor



Han K. Kang, Dr.P.H., Director of the WRIISC at the DCVAMC

Han K. Kang, Dr.P.H., has been named a finalist for the prestigious 2004 Service to America Career Achievement Medal. Dr. Kang is Director of the War-Related Illness and Injury Study Center

(WRIISC) at The Washington DC VA Medical Center.

The award recognizes federal employees for exemplary government service and significant lifetime achievements in public service. Recipients of the medal receive a \$10,000 award.

The Service to America Medals are awarded annually by the Partnership for Public Service and the magazines of Atlantic Media Company. Most career civilian federal employees are eligible for nominations.

Dr. Kang runs one of two VA WRIISCs in the country. The centers conduct focused deployment-health research and provide clinical care to combat veterans who have complex illnesses. ★

veterans who fought to keep Korea a free democracy.

In appreciation, Minister An gave the DCVAMC a 51-inch plasma television, now being enjoyed in the Red/Green Primary Care Clinic waiting area. ★



VA Capitol Health Care Network

Veterans Integrated Service Network 5 (VISN 5)

Important Telephone Numbers

VA Maryland Health Care System

Baltimore VAMC

1-800-463-6295

VAMHCS Medical Advice Line

1-800-865-2441

Perry Point VAMC

1-800-949-1003

**Automated Prescription Refill and
Clinic Appointment System**

1-800-463-6295, ext. 7395

**Baltimore VA Rehabilitation
& Extended Care Center**

1-800-463-6295

Martinsburg VA Medical Center

Martinsburg VAMC

(304) 263-0811

Medical Advice Line

1-800-817-3807 or (304) 262-4855

Patient Eligibility

(304) 263-0811, ext. 3758/3757
Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.–4:30 p.m.
or ext. 3050 after 4:30 p.m.

Automated Prescription Refill System

(304) 263-0811, ext. 4870 (all hours)

Outreach Coordinator

(304) 263-0811, ext. 4031

Washington DC VA Medical Center

General Information

(202) 745-8000

Medical Advice Line

(202) 745-8247

VETS Information

(202) 745-4046

PTSD Clinic Number

(202) 745-8591

Outpatient Clinics

Cambridge, MD

(410) 228-6243

Charlotte Hall, MD

(301) 884-7102

Cumberland, MD

(301) 724-0061

Fort Howard, MD

(410) 477-1800

Glen Burnie, MD

(410) 590-4140

Greenbelt, MD

(301) 345-2463

Hagerstown, MD

(301) 665-1462

Loch Raven, MD

(410) 605-7650

Pocomoke City, MD

(410) 957-6718

Alexandria, VA

(703) 719-6797

Harrisonburg, VA

(540) 442-1773

Stephens City, VA

(540) 869-0600

Franklin, WV

(304) 358-2355

Petersburg, WV

(304) 257-5817

Washington, DC

(202) 745-8685

Vet Centers

Baltimore, MD

(410) 764-9400

Cambridge, MD

(410) 228-6305, ext. 4123

Elkton, MD

(410) 392-4485

Silver Spring, MD

(301) 589-1073

Washington, DC

(202) 543-8821

Martinsburg, WV

(304) 263-6776

Alexandria, VA

(703) 360-8633

Veterans Benefit Administration

1-800-827-1000

Education Information Hotline

1-800-442-4551

Visit us on our website at www.va.gov/visn5

Veterans' Health

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